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# The Importance of the Sibling Experience

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WHEN WE CONSIDER THE ROLE OF SIBLINGS WE PROBABLY think immediately of the ordinal position of siblings and its effect on the child and of sibling rivalry. I shall begin by citing a vignette from Anna Freud's book, *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defense* (1936), because it illustrates a number of points.

She was the middle child of several brothers and sisters. Throughout childhood she suffered from passionate penis envy, relating to her elder and to her younger brother, and from jealousy, which was repeatedly excited by her mother's successive pregnancies. Finally, envy and jealousy combined in a fierce hostility to her mother. But, since the child's love fixation was no less strong than her hatred, a violent defensive conflict with her negative impulses succeeded an initial period of uninhibited unruliness and naughtiness. She dreaded lest the manifestation of her hate should cause her to lose her mother's love, of which she could not bear to be deprived. . . . As she entered upon the period of latency, this anxiety situation and conflict of conscience became more and more acute and her ego tried to master her impulses in various ways. In order to solve the problem of ambivalence she displaced outward one side of her ambivalent feeling. Her mother continued to be a love object, but, from that time on, there was always in the girl's life a second important person of the female sex, whom she hated violently. This eased matters: her hatred

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of the more remote object was not visited with the sense of guilt so mercilessly as was her hatred of her mother. But even the displaced hatred was a source of much suffering. As time went on, it was plain that this first displacement was inadequate as a means of mastering the situation. . . .

The patient then entered on a process of projection. The hatred which she had felt for female love objects or their substitutes was transformed into the conviction that she herself was hated, slighted or persecuted by them. . . . But the use of this mechanism left upon her character a permanent paranoid imprint, which was a source of very great difficulty to her both in youth and adult years [p. 44ff.].

Here we see the role of the sibling position and the influence of envy and jealousy. We also see that these important factors are subject to continuous changes during the developmental phases, leading to changes of defenses and symptoms and influencing personality organization and character formation.

The vignette highlights envy and jealousy, but we also know that in the child's early years—the focus of our study—rivalry plays an important role. While these three affects undoubtedly are related and in fact mutually influence each other, I believe there are advantages to differentiating them, as I have shown in my 1982 paper (which was partly based on this sibling study). In order to avoid using these terms interchangeably, I shall define them on both dynamic and genetic grounds and test the validity of these definitions on the basis of clinical data.

*Rivalry* is the competition among siblings for the exclusive or preferred care from the person they share. This definition stays close to the original meaning of the word, for rivalry was the fight for the access to the river, that is, for the supply of the basic nutrients of water. Rivalry also involves competition, an ongoing struggle for the exclusive possession of the object. Rivalry is therefore not an intent or a wish but an act; if the wish to compete is not acted upon, we will observe undue defenses or reaction formations.

*Envy* refers to the wish for the possession of attributes that a parent or sibling has, such as penis, strength, breasts. Thus, envy is located on many levels of development—from the wish to incorporate, to the envy of possessions, to phallic competi-

tion with castration anxiety. If envy is the insistent wish to gain what is realistically unattainable, then we assume that reality testing is challenged, that fantasies and wish fulfillment have a power which will have a serious effect on psychic structure.

It should at least be mentioned that Melanie Klein assigns a major role to envy in the child's relation to the mother and specifically relates envy to aggression. As my definition indicates, I assume that envy occurs on various levels of development and is subject to changes in successive phases. Nor do I believe that envy is part of the interaction prior to the evolution of the ego as a psychic structure.

*Jealousy* is the competition with a sibling or parent for the love of the person whom they share. Underlying it is the fear of the loss of the object's love. Jealousy therefore is close to the phallic-oedipal organization.

Both rivalry and jealousy are defined in the context of triadic relationships, while envy is an expression of the diadic relationship and does not directly focus on a third person.

Observing these phenomena as they emerge and following them through the various steps of development, we can see the extension of each in the arena of differentiated function and how each links itself with the other in many forms and combinations. Rivalry easily leads to jealousy, and it is precisely this continuity which makes their differentiation valuable. As we discern the forerunner of jealousy, we can study the effect of unresolved rivalry on jealousy. Proceeding in this way, we avoid the interchangeable use of the terms and therefore do not obscure genetic considerations.

These concepts can be further clarified if they are viewed from the perspective of the developmental line extending from fear of the loss of the object, fear of the loss of the object's love, to castration fear. Rivalry corresponds to the period of fear of loss of the object, but rivalry is more than separation fear. Rivalry is characterized by an increased longing for the object and by acts to eliminate the other person who wishes to share the primary object. The competition may accentuate and intensify the relationship to the primary object with increased libidinal and aggressive strivings toward both the primary object and the rivals.

It may be a crucial moment in the life of the child when rivalry is given up, when the child feels abandoned and turns away from the exclusive tie to the object. We know from the analyses of adults and children that reaching such a turning point has a permanent influence on the child's subsequent psychic functioning, which may express itself in a variety of ways. It may lead to detachment and isolation, or to a premature search for substitutes, or to substantial gains in individuation and differentiation.

As the term penis envy indicates, envy originally relates to a body attribute. Similarly, envy of breasts, hair, color of eyes refers to physical conditions. As was true of rivalry, these envious wishes may stimulate competition, but they may also increase fear of loss of body integrity. Later on the envy of physical attributes may be extended to envy of talents, strength, intelligence, and any characteristic that the other person possesses, regardless of whether it is realistically possible to obtain them.

The following observations, easily made, seem to be examples of envy. A young brother seemed intent on destroying whatever his older sister possessed and wished to take away whatever she seemed to have, but then he really did not know what to do with her possessions. This is quite different from rivalry, though the desire to possess something may underlie it. Another case is that of a girl who after the birth of a brother desperately longed for a doll in a shop window which she passed every day. Eventually the doll was given to her, but at once she tired of it and discarded it.

Does envy contribute to the slow differentiation of outside and inside (e.g., if we regard the breast as an external object and the wish for oral incorporation and possession as arising from internal sources)? Is there a developmental line which indicates a progression in the formation of the body image and in the corresponding formation of the object image? The pervasive desire to acquire and possess may actually help in establishing the permanence of objects. One can observe toddlers playing next to each other, each with exactly the same toy, but they are continually intrigued by the toy being used by the other child. We will surely also link this to the oral and anal

strivings and the correlation between envy and greed. However, the frustration, exploration, and mastery of such envy can be supportive of progressive development.

If we think of young children who wish for attributes of mother or father or older sibling, we realize that they may believe their wishes to be unobtainable because they cannot yet grasp that by growing up they eventually will be able to obtain them. Thus envy could be a desire for something a person *thinks* may never be reached.

Freud (1925) assumes that the castration anxiety is related to the perception of anatomical differences during the phallic phase. Today we have evidence that these differences are noticed earlier and that envy may be observable before the phallic phase. These prephallic experiences could then influence the role and the intensity of penis envy and castration fear. Earlier sibling reactions which reflect envy influence the outcome of the castration complex in girls, and for this reason alone it is useful to differentiate envy from jealousy. Freud (1931) proposes that the *beginning* of the castration complex in girls leads to the positive oedipal position, while the positive oedipus complex in boys is terminated by the castration complex. It is important to follow the lines of development of envy more carefully in order to learn more about the differences in the development of boys and girls.

It is clear that, in addition to the interaction between siblings, we have to consider the influence of parents. The response of siblings to the preferred child highlights this important aspect because rivalry, jealousy, and envy are increased. The story of Joseph is an example; he was the preferred child, the one who was the most intelligent and best dressed. We can also study the character of the preferred child, Joseph's avoidance of rivalry, his guilt and his wish to share that which he could give away with siblings. Does the preferred child struggle to maintain his position with his parents by avoiding rivalry, or is this his "hidden" rivalry? Does he avoid sibling envy, or does he look for those attributes which he does not have; Joseph was the intelligent one, he may have envied the strength of his siblings. In addition, this story tells us of the lasting bonds between siblings, for Joseph saved them all.

Differences in the evolvement of rivalry, jealousy, and envy may depend upon whether the child is an older or younger sibling. The sibling position may be significant. When the only child becomes the older child, he or she moves from a central position of interest and care to one which requires sharing. The younger child will, in the first years of life, take the circumstances of his environment as he finds them for granted, without having to experience a sudden shift, but he will also be exposed to the older sibling's attacks on him. The older child, while feeling displaced, may later enjoy the younger's admiration, which the latter rarely experiences to the same degree.

Rivalry can emerge within the context of the existing fabric of parent-child relations and is not dependent upon the birth of a sibling. Furthermore, the younger child's turning toward and finding pleasure in the older sibling may start the younger on the road of a positive relationship, while the older sibling will begin by viewing his sibling as an intruder, especially if they are only 2 years apart.

When John was 4 years old, he had many fights with his 22-month-old younger brother, Michael, for it appeared to him that Michael was preferred. Whenever John was comforted or approached by his brother, he pushed him away. At 7 years of age John wanted to live in the cellar, but he was afraid that his mother would lock him in or out. He was aware of his anger toward his mother and brother, but not quite of his projection. This constellation of fear of loss of mother's love and jealousy affected his oedipal struggle. Here we can see the sibling jealousy not only as a displacement from the oedipus complex but also as an earlier condition which in turn influences the oedipal, libidinal and aggressive organization. This was further accentuated by the father's emotional absence from his family which left the center to rest on the mother-sibling negotiations.

The triadic aspect has a different psychological impact on the older and the younger child; and the road which is taken in the rivalry between them seems to follow different directions so that eventually a measure of equality between siblings can be found. The younger child's libidinal attachment to the older can be contrasted with the stimulation of aggressive strivings in the older child. The circumstances of whether one rejects or is

rejected may have an influence on drive distribution and super-ego development.

If I am correct in these assumptions, then this difference in rivalry will then also affect the characteristics of envy and jealousy. This is to say, the nature of envy—of wishing to have something from someone one admires, rather than from someone one feels negative about to begin with—may affect the coping with these problems as expressed in imitation and identification or disengagement and separation. As to jealousy, I would suggest the notion that when a child admires the older sibling, he or she will assume that the parents will also love that older sibling. The child will have a different response when he or she predominantly resents the younger sibling who continues to have the love of the parents.

In the psychoanalytic literature the traumatic reaction to the birth of a sibling is mentioned most often. I believe we would agree that the story begins earlier, during pregnancy. As the mother's body changes, the child may make an identification with her, express the wish to carry a baby too, and his envy can be stimulated as well. Dependent on the parents' attitude during this period, the expectation of a playmate can result in disappointment when the unresponsive sibling is born. When the mother disengages herself from her firstborn child, aggression against the not yet born newcomer may already arise and the child may turn to the father for comfort. Thus we can observe envy and rivalry, which later on may also include jealousy. The parental fantasies, their wish for the same- or opposite-sex child will set the stage for the older child's future reactions.

I have referred to the child's displacement of the sibling experience to the phallic-oedipal correlation or of his relationship with the parents to the sibling. The question has been raised whether this displacement presents advantages which allow the working through of conflicts or under what conditions they burden the already existing conflicts by intensifying them. Here I just mention another displacement, namely, that to the relationship with peers.

B. was a child who, in the latter part of the first year, showed much mouthing with an intense urge for oral incorporation.



This attitude was paralleled by her equally intense visual incorporative approach. She was quite vocal, but when her sibling was born, this activity was greatly reduced. She became receptive rather than motor-active and did not reach out socially. She also took a long time to show her aggression, but when she did, she was quite forceful. She tended to be verbally rather than physically aggressive, but when her anger against her sibling was sufficiently strong, she had an enormous outburst.

B. had always had a strong yearning for her mother's love and affection, a longing which she did not show easily and covered by her wish for the teacher to function as a mother substitute. When her sibling was born, the teachers were concerned that B. was truly deprived of maternal attention, but later the mother turned her affection back to B.

B.'s preferred activity in the classroom was painting, which was related to her mother's interest. Most of the contacts of her otherwise quiet behavior described were between her and her "substitute siblings." There was rivalry between her and her peers in regard to the possession of toys, but her reaction in these situations was less intense than that to her sibling. This replay on a reduced scale may be the significant factor. Similarly, she observed the teacher's reaction as she did that of her mother.

In the nursery group, B. had a calming, quieting influence on the other children, except for a boy toward whom B. showed much aggression in her fantasy games. This could be explained by the fact that he preceded her in the treatment with the same therapist—he had become a "transference sibling"; but she also assumed that as a boy he would be preferred by the analyst who, like her own father, would prefer a boy. As she saw this boy playing very actively, sometimes hyperactively, in the nursery school, she attempted to compete with him by adopting his way of playing in the therapy room in order to be loved by the therapist. Here, too, she was receptive, visually incorporative, and then "imitative." Her behavior with this boy with whom she had to share the therapist contrasted with that during the earlier period, when she had not made a strong attachment to any of the nursery school children.

I have so far stressed the singularity of the sibling experience

with reference to rivalry, envy, and jealousy, which may give the impression that the sibling experience is the primary condition for the occurrence of these phenomena. But there is evidence that rivalry, envy, and jealousy also are evoked in a child who has no siblings and that they emerge in the context of the relationship to the parents. One could go a step further and assume that these reactions, with different shades of emphasis, also are characteristic of only children raised by a single parent. These situations raise the question how the sibling experience adds to and modifies the outcome of these powerful affects. Furthermore, they would allow us to examine three inferences:

1. Envy and jealousy are basically related to the feeling of conflict and dissatisfaction the child experiences with the primary psychological parent. Rivalry more closely reflects the child-to-child reaction.

2. The child's need to experience the parent as omnipotent and omniscient is at the same time universally expressed in those residues of infantile wishes and expectations that we observe as rivalry, envy, and jealousy and other "sibling experiences."

3. The need for acquisition and possession underly rivalry, envy, and jealousy.

In general, discussions of rivalry, envy, and jealousy are based on the implicit assumption that the child forms an exclusive primary relationship; that is to say, that early bonding and attachment, rather than being selective, occur only with the "primary objects." All other secondary relationships are then viewed as a spin-off of this relationship, carryovers from, or displacements of it. As Anna Freud and Sophie Dann (1951) put it, "According to the results of child analysis and reconstruction from the analyses of adults, the child's relationship to his brothers and sisters is subordinated to his relationship to the parents, is, in fact, a function of it. Siblings are normally accessories to the parents, the relations to them being governed by attitudes of rivalry, envy, jealousy, and competition for the love of the parents" (p. 166).

In our study group, however, we also considered the possibility that children might form relationships with their siblings that are not merely a reflection of their relationship to the

parents but have special characteristics unique to the sibling relationship. That this may be the case was suggested by the following observations:

1. Children have a special empathy with one another for they still share a similar psychic organization when there is only a small age difference between them. They easily tune in to one another with respect to drive manifestations and fluctuations between progression and regression. In twins one refers to the twinning relationship, which is codetermined by mirroring of the same images and similar dispositions. Yet, some of the factors of twinning cannot be totally excluded from the regular interaction systems among siblings.

2. Experimentation, displacement of aggression, sexual curiosity, and sex play can provide special, shared nontraumatic experiences that go far beyond the identification with the parents they share.

3. As the siblings go through various phases of development, they can try changing attitudes and interaction systems on each other; models of identification can be established; and processes of differentiation will occur.

4. On the basis of infant observations which document that infants respond differentially to various people early in life, we can assume that infants form significant relationships quite early. I believe that out of these various interactions a primary relationship emerges gradually, depending upon the libidinal cathexis offered the child by the objects and the choice which the child makes according to his own disposition and needs.

It is most interesting to review "An Experiment in Group Upbringing" by Anna Freud and Sophie Dann (1951). The children who were orphaned during the war had formed a primary group relationship; only later did they accept, step by step, an attachment to significant adults. The children clung to the group as others may cling to a parent. "They had no other wish than to be together and became upset when they were separated from each other, even for short moments. No child would consent to remain upstairs while the others were downstairs, or vice versa, and no child would be taken for a walk or on an errand without the others. If anything of the kind happened, the single child would constantly ask for the other children while the group would fret for the missing child" (p. 131).

While these phenomena were observed in very special circumstances—the children all had spent their first years in a concentration camp—one must consider the possibility that even under less severe circumstances the child will seek out various objects when the mother, inevitably, is unable to provide the full libidinal gratification or the sensory and affective interaction the child desires. On the basis of the gratification obtained from these objects, the child will form significant attachments of various intensity, in addition to the one with mother, and all of these will serve his further development. We certainly have come closer to acknowledging that fathers play a significant role in this respect; similarly, siblings undoubtedly play a significant role, which deserves further exploration.

I shall briefly comment on two such areas in which the rivalry, envy, and jealousy experienced and modified in the sibling relationship play a significant role: (1) their potential effect on character formation; (2) their influence on object choice.

1. In the early period of psychoanalysis it was understood that character deviations were closely linked to the inability to resolve libidinal-phase conflicts. Greediness or phallic competition, exhibitionism or overcontrol with compulsive features were seen to be consequences of these conflicts. I believe it would be fruitful further to explore the role of rivalry, envy, and jealousy as they are deposited within the character structure, particularly when the sibling interaction does not lead to modifications and changes, or when the correlates of rivalry, envy, and jealousy as experienced with the parents reinforce the sibling constellation.

Drawing on our analytic experiences with children and adults, we can say that unresolved rivalry, envy, and jealousy not only leave their imprint on a person's character but also are related to specific character disorders. While earlier psychoanalytic, nosological outlines considered oral, anal, and phallic character disorders, one can also use rivalry, envy, and jealousy as one of the features to characterize a personality deviation without assigning to either one of them the primary organizing role in the development of pathology or even implying that rivalry, envy, or jealousy plays a primary causative role in the specific symptomatology. Penis envy, for instance, may be part of the whole phallic complex, castration anxiety, phobic phe-

nomena, omnipotence; but, as can be seen, it involves a clustering of factors around envy.

It has been suggested that sibling group functioning on various levels of development will assist in the modification and resolution of rivalry. I doubt, however, that group functioning has the same influence on the resolution of either envy or jealousy.

2. Psychoanalytic findings indicate the significant role of early object relations in a person's later choice of love object. Such choices frequently betray the link to specific characteristics of both parents. But the choice of a marital partner is often influenced by others than the parents; partners may be selected on the basis of resemblances to siblings; or the psychic representation of the sibling may lead to the choice of a love object having opposite qualities, thereby indicating the importance of this influence. Naturally, we always consider the impact of parents, their preference, but we also seek the "matching" aspect which makes a tie between two people more intense.

These are just a few examples of the importance of the sibling relationship that has to be examined in greater detail. One needs to follow more carefully not only the phase-specific influences on the sibling relationship, but also how it changes in the course of development and throughout the life cycle.

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